The assertion of majoritarian will in both India and the US has legitimised the exclusion of certain sections of the population

Coarse rhetoric in the political arena, where civility at the best of times is at a premium, is not unique to any country. Yet present times seem different, since the invasion of incivility is global in scope and perhaps most striking in the liberal democracies, which seemed to have outgrown that affliction.

As basic liberal principles of formal equality and the constitutional protection of rights come under challenge, the “dog whistle” which registers only with those predisposed to hear its message, is cast aside. Today’s politicians call out to visceral ethnic and religious animosities, not shying away from explicit assertions that those who truly merit constitutional rights suffer deprivation on account of the rude intrusions of the undeserving.

In US President Donald Trump’s narrative, underprivileged whites are where they are because illegal immigrants threaten their security and well-being. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s overtures to the Indian electorate likewise aggressively target enemies who weaken the nation’s resolve from within.

In border regions of mixed ethnic demographies, Modi’s loyal understudy Amit Shah, president of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), speaks of immigrants as “termites” eating away at the nation from within.

Vote suppression techniques in the US, weaponised by anti-immigrant rhetoric, seek out a broad range of quarries, with a disproportionate impact on the poor and the African-American. Recently concluded midterm elections to the US Congress, effectively a referendum on Trump’s two-year long reign, witnessed a substantial swing in the popular vote. Yet, despite a determined campaign against the President, the opposition Democrats did not quite earn commensurate rewards in the two chambers.
Ruthlessly gerrymandered electoral districts have played their role alongside stringent voter identity rules. As Harvard University constitutional scholar Laurence Tribe put it in remarks to *The Guardian* after the midterm results came in, “the rise of minority rule in America is now unmistakable”.

In the more complex Indian scenario, vote suppression is usually put down to administrative lacunae rather than political design. Efforts at introducing biometric identification and more explicitly, the National Register of Citizens that has stirred anxieties in the North-Eastern state of Assam and anger in neighbouring West Bengal, speak of an intent to introduce a more overt policy of exclusion from citizen entitlements.

Sustenance of citizen entitlements is part of political consensus building. Undoing these would mean some degree of coercion to sustain an appearance of social cohesion. Political rhetoric untethered from all propriety may be one way of building up a public mood where coercive strategies would gain acceptance.

If civility is a basic norm of liberal democracy, it comes with the related and equally vital premise that participants would engage in the public sphere on a common understanding of what constitutes the world of fact. If as the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, the “world is everything that is the case”, constructive public interactions cannot be sustained on what is not the case.

Trump’s rhetoric is that of a wilful child, a fabulist intent on moulding the world in accordance with his imagination. But he operates on contested terrain, with an energetic media willing to call out his lies, leaving him dependent on a single news channel owned by the world’s least loved media baron, Rupert Murdoch.

Yet, there are sufficient numbers willing to live within Trump’s world of alternative facts. That position may change by the time the next election season rolls around, with potentially fatal consequences for his presidency.

As India prepares for a busy season of elections between now and mid-2019, the propaganda mills are being honed to unleash a torrent of alternative facts. At a gathering of the faithful in September, BJP president Shah spoke
of how the party could mobilise to make any information go “viral”, irrespective of factual veracity.

Apart from that potential inherent in the brave new world of information technology, the BJP has begun creating facts on the ground through unabashed assertion of majoritarian will. The names of some of the oldest cities of Uttar Pradesh have been changed in an effort to efface any suggestion of an Islamic provenance. And amid growing impatience at the Supreme Court’s refusal to accede to an accelerated timetable of hearings on the site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, there is talk of introducing legislation to trump the judicial process.

That manner of legislation would legitimise both the trespass of 1949 by which idols of Ram Lalla were introduced into the Babri Masjid and the vandalism of December 6, 1992. Yet by far its worst possible consequence would be to destroy any possibility of a civil dialogue within a shared universe of facts. If the majoritarian will finally determines what is the case and what is not, it will not be long before every segment of this vast and complex nation stands up to insist on its right to create a world of its choosing.

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